

This Television Life

Have you ever listened to that show on NPR, *This American Life*? I don't know about you, but as far as I'm concerned, it has to be one of the most amazing things to ever grace our country's airwaves. Back when it started, over a decade ago now, it was unlike just about anything you heard on public radio. This wasn't a show about news or music or comedy. It wasn't even, really, a show about people. It was a show about stories, stripped down to their pure essence, people talking to you with a little bit of music in the background.

Humans seem to have a natural craving for stories. Whatever the topic, it's more fun to hear a story about it. Everyone tells stories. Everyone tells stories, but some people love crafting them until they're perfect, like little pastries of information with curves in all the right places. And that's what *This American Life* did each week on the radio: it presented three or four perfectly-crafted stories, all tangentially related to one loose theme, to your car or home for one full hour.

A couple years ago the Showtime network called Ira Glass, the head and host of *This American Life* and asked him if he wanted to make a television version of his show. For most people, getting a call from a television network would be a fairly big deal. But not Glass. Every week, his radio show is heard by 1.6 million people. A hit show on Showtime gets half a million. So Glass said no, there was no way their show would work on television. Still, Showtime persisted, asking what it would take to make it work. So Glass thought of every crazy demand that came to mind. And Showtime met them all.

The result, which premieres tonight on the pay-cable Showtime network, has to be one of the most amazing things to grace American television. It is unlike just about anything you've ever seen on TV. The best way I can think to describe it is this: Have you ever seen one of those stock photo movies? You know, the kind with the lusciously oversaturated colors, weird landscapes, and slow-motion movements? The kind of footage that makes the normal world look magical? Now, take that, and imagine an entire television show made out of it. It's absolutely incredible.

To promote the show, since Showtime isn't exactly, *This American Life* went on a six-city tour. I caught them in Chicago, where a jam-packed crowd of dedicated fans (still pissed about the team moving to New York to film the TV show) came to hear "What I Learned From Television". We were in the Chicago Theater, a local landmark that holds thousands. And, I have to say, it's probably the most fun I've ever had in a theater.

You know how on the radio show, they do these incredibly moving stories that just send chills of emotion down your spine. Now imagine listening to that, in the middle of a crowd of thousands of people who all came out to hear the very same thing. I mean, these were people who cheered individual names in the credits at the end of the show. (We'll miss you Elizabeth Meister!) I've never felt a room so charged with emotion before.

So do these guys a favor. Do yourself a favor. Take your Nielsen box and switch it to Showtime tonight at 10:30. It'll be like nothing you've ever felt before.

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